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ON PAGE A-1

THE LOS ANGELES TIMES
20 DECEMBER 1982

CIA Covert Action Punish Nicaragua for Salvador

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WASHINGTON—Under orders from President Reagan to "harass" but not "overthrow" the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, the CIA is using neighboring Honduras as a base for its biggest covert action since the Vietnam War.

The CIA's operations against Nicaragua are a pale shadow of the high-flying days of the secret war in Laos, however. With the agency's manpower drastically cut back and its mission closely circumscribed by the President and Congress, the CIA is largely limited to supporting local paramilitary forces waging a hit-and-run campaign to punish Nicaragua for aiding leftist rebels in El Salvador.

The CIA-backed operations are using a "tit for tat" strategy, intelligence sources said. When the Salvadoran rebels blow up a power line or bridge in El Salvador, for example, the anti-Sandinista guerrillas demolish a power line or bridge in Nicaragua.

Earlier this year, leftist rebels tried to disrupt the Salvadoran economy and elections by felling power pylons, blowing up bridges and setting trucks afire to block the main highway between San Salvador and San Miguel. In retaliation, two bridges in northern Nicaragua were destroyed and Nicaraguan authorities charged, sabotage teams tried to dynamite a power plant, a cement factory and another bridge in western Nicaragua.

"The message to Managua is: 'There's a price to aiding the rebels. If you stop, we'll stop the groups harassing you,'" one intelligence official said.

Because the operations of U.S. intelligence agencies in Central America are classified, Administration officials declined to discuss the matter on the record. But interviews with persons close to the operations provided details on the scope of American covert operations and the guidelines under which they are being carried out.

The directive signed by Reagan a year ago bars funds for followers of the late Nicaraguan strong man Anastasio Somoza, who was ousted by the Sandinistas in 1979, the official said, and it specifies that the aim is to "harass" rather than destabilize or overthrow the Sandinistas.

150 to 200 Agents

The price tag on the covert program for Central America, which includes indirectly providing arms, training and organizational support for between 500 and 1,500 anti-Sandinista guerrillas, was \$19.9 million for 1982, according to the official. Approximately the same funding level has been requested for next year.

This amount, and the number of CIA men involved, is miniscule by Vietnam standards. Hundreds of millions of dollars were spent for the secret CIA war in Laos alone, and more than 5,000 CIA employees were involved.

Now, there are reports that 150 to 200 CIA agents are in Honduras. But Administration sources insist that the CIA does not yet have that many men in its entire covert operations program.

"Rebuilding has begun after the draw-down during the Carter Administration," one intelligence source said, "but these aren't the kind of men you pick off the street."

Another source speculated that if there are 150 to 200 intelligence agents in Honduras, the number must include personnel from other U.S. intelligence agencies in addition to the CIA, organization such as the National Security Agency, which operates radio and other electronic eavesdropping networks. Honduran officials are also being trained in intelligence-collection work.

Despite the relatively small size and scope of the Nicaragua operation, some members of Congress are increasingly concerned because it represents the first significant re-birth of CIA-backed paramilitary action in almost a decade. And it was covert action that got the CIA into trouble in the past.

Rep. Thomas R. Harkin (D-Iowa) and Sen. Christopher H. Dodd (D-Conn.) both have tried to stop funding for the CIA operation. The present policy has only "radicalized Nicaragua to the left and Honduras to the right," Harkin said. "Dodd complained that the policy is attempting to impose 'military solutions to political problems.'"

The Administration's covert action program also was criticized by Morton H. Halperin, director of the Center for National Security Studies, which describes itself as a project of the Fund for Peace and the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) Foundation. Halperin, whose organization recently studied public reports on the operation, said in a review of those reports that the operation is either "aimed at destroying the government of Nicaragua or is out of control."

On the other hand, William G. Hyland, former deputy national security assistant to the President in the Ford and Nixon Administrations, said his opinion, also based on published reports—is that "things are probably going okay."

Might Backfire

"I'm not against our having a little something on the bargaining table (i.e., harassing capability) if it's not the size of an army," Hyland said. "But remember, the name of the game there is El Salvador, not Nicaragua."

There is concern within the Administration, as well as in Congress, that the covert operation cannot easily be contained and might backfire to the embarrassment of the United States.

Specifically, relations between Nicaragua and Honduras have deteriorated toward open hostilities as Honduras, torn between the United States and Cuban-backed Nicaragua, becomes what one official there called "the Lebanon of Central America." The startling rise in urban terrorism, as well as leftist guerrilla activity in Honduras during the last year, has been directly attributed to Honduras's support for anti-Sandinistas.

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